

Patent Application
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SPECIFICATIONS

TITLE OF INVENTION

RIDE CONTROL SYSTEM FOR ARTICULATED VEHICLES

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

Not Applicable

STATEMENT REGARDING FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH OR DEVELOPMENT

Not Applicable

REFERENCE TO A MICROFICHE APPENDIX

Not applicable

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This invention applies to articulated vehicles such as semi-trucks, railroad cars and other vehicles where different sections of the vehicle are attached to one another by means of an articulated linkage of the type of a hitch assembly, and the invention relates to a Ride Control System (RCS) for restoring stability to the trailed part(s) of the vehicle when unwanted erratic jackknifing occurs at cruising speed. Throughout the following description of the invention, an on-highway semi truck will be referred to as a typical application for RCS.

A semi truck is commonly configured in such a way that when the vehicle makes a turn, its trailer(s) must pivot around the hitch assembly that connects the trailer to the tractor in order for the vehicle, as a whole, to complete the turn. The trailer behavior, and in particular the angle that it forms with its tractor vehicle, is referred to as jackknifing. Jackknifing is inherent of the mechanical configuration that allows the trailer to be attached to the tractor in a less rigid way. Under some driving conditions where the vehicle is moving straight ahead and the driver is not engaged in a steering maneuver, erratic jackknifing can occur and cause the trailer to wander laterally with respect to the vehicle. If this type of vacillating movement persists long enough and achieves a critical frequency, the trailer could be thrown off the hitch assembly and roll over. The damage caused by a rolled over trailer can be significant and cost lives.

Being able to detect and to counteract such erratic jackknifing is a difficult skill to acquire for an average truck driver. In this invention an electronically controlled and mechanically operated RCS is presented to assist the drivers of semi-trucks (the preferred application) and other articulated vehicles by

providing means for detecting and counteracting unwanted erratic jackknifing. The system continuously monitors several inputs, including the driver's intention, the road conditions, and the trailer position. It is the combination of these inputs that allows the RCS to determine the probability of a roll-over due to erratic jackknifing. In the event of high probability of a roll-over the system would apply brakes to selected trailer wheels in such a way that the trailer can be dragged on one side or another and be forced to line up with the tractor truck.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

This invention is directed to RCS as a method and a structure for detecting and counteracting unwanted erratic jackknifing. The essential components of the system include several input ports for receiving signals from sensors such as a steering wheel sensor, wheel speed sensors, a trailer angle sensor, a suspension sensor, a central processing unit for evaluating the probability of trailer roll-over, and at least one output port for remotely applying brakes to selected wheels on the trailer.

There are several objects and advantages of this invention, including:

- Enhanced operation of on-highway semi-trucks, off-highway articulated trucks commonly found on the mining and construction sites, and other trailedd vehicles;
- Enhanced safety for drivers of the above vehicles;
- Enhanced safety for other drivers in the vicinity of the above vehicles.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 shows a flow chart that illustrates how RCS functions in general as a method and as a structure.

FIG. 2 shows preferred locations of the main components of RCS based on a semi-truck as a typical application.

FIG. 3 shows a hypothetical scenario of RCS response and its effectiveness on erratic jackknifing in an articulated vehicle.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

In FIG. 1, reference numeral 4 designates a power supply to the system and an initialization step. It is during this step that RCS resets all input and output ports to their initial values by default. Reference numeral 5 designates truck wheel sensors which provide inputs to the system to determine whether or not the truck is in motion. As indicated by reference numeral 6, if the truck is not in motion the system goes back to the previous step where it waits for signals from the wheel sensors. If, however, the truck is in motion, RCS proceeds to acquiring inputs from the steering wheel sensor, designated by reference numeral 7 as the driver's intention; from the trailer position sensor, designated by reference numeral 8 as trailer behavior; from the suspension sensor, designated by reference numeral 9 as road conditions; and from other sensors as designated by reference numeral 10. Reference numeral 7 allows the system to determine whether the truck is making a turn or not. If the truck is making a turn then jackknifing should be expected between the tractor and the trailer, and the system should not counteract this kind of jackknifing since it is desirable for maneuvering the truck as a whole. Reference numeral 8 designates a position sensor that allows the system to determine whether or not the trailer is lined up with the tractor truck. The input from the position sensor is first used in conjunction with other sensors to detect erratic jackknifing, which leads to several RCS commands directed to suppressing the jackknifing. At the end of these commands the position sensor is used again to determine whether the

jackknifing has been successfully suppressed. This constitutes an internal feedback in the structure of RCS.

Reference numeral 9 designates suspension sensors that allow the system to determine the shape of the terrain and the conditions of the road based on the suspension response. Reference numeral 10 designates other sensors that the system may need for calculating the probability of an accident as designated by reference numeral 11. Reference numeral 12 indicates that if the probability of a roll-over due to erratic jackknifing is low, the system returns to collecting new data from sensors to watch for erratic jackknifing. If on the other hand the probability of a roll-over is high, the system calculates the speed average based on the truck wheel sensor inputs as indicated by reference numeral 13, and proceeds to determining which trailer wheel is spinning faster than the truck speed average. Reference numeral 14 also indicates a set of commands by RCS directed to slowing down over spinning trailer wheels by applying remotely brakes on them. This is because when the trailer swings in one direction, it moves around in a circle in such a way that those wheels that are on the outer diameter of the circle have a greater angular velocity than those wheels on the inner diameter. Because of this behavior slowing down faster wheels results in dragging the trailer on the side of these wheels. The dragging can be done alternatively between the right and the left sides until the position sensor indicates that the trailer is lined up with the tractor. Reference numeral 15 indicates that, based on new inputs from the trailer position sensor (reference numeral 8) the system must always verify whether or not jackknifing still exists after brakes have been applied to selected wheels. This prevents the system for applying brakes for a period of time longer than it is needed.

In FIG. 2 Reference numeral 16 designates the tractor truck wheels where speed sensors are embedded. It is from the truck wheel speed that is calculated the speed average needed to compare with the trailer wheel speed for determining the direction in which the trailer is swinging when erratic jackknifing

occurs. Reference numeral 17 designates the trailer wheels to which the system applies brakes one side at a time under erratic jackknifing. Reference numeral 18 designates a hitch assembly that attaches the trailer to the truck. In a preferred application and a preferred system configuration an angle sensor is located in the hitch assembly or its vicinity for providing the position of the trailer with respect to the truck. Reference numeral 19 designates the trailer suspension assembly which also is combined with mechanical parts of the anti-lock brake system. When erratic jackknifing is detected, the anti-lock brake system is activated by RCS to slow down fast moving wheels and bring the trailer in line with the truck. Reference numeral 20 designates the trailer, and reference numeral 21 designates the tractor truck. It is on the truck that the RCS central processor unit is located along with other sensors that provide inputs to the system.

In FIG. 3 the line A indicates the path followed by the truck as a function of time. Under normal conditions the path followed by the trailer would also be that of the truck. If however erratic jackknifing occurs, then depending on the magnitude of the forces acting on the trailer to cause erratic jackknifing, the path followed by the trailer would be that indicated by the curve B. When erratic jackknifing is detected, the RCS will activate brakes on the trailer using the trailer anti-lock brake system. In this case brakes are applied on one side of the trailer at the time depending on the orientation of the trailer. If for instance the trailer is swinging to the left, brakes will be applied to the right side where drag is needed in order to force the trailer to line up with the truck. Subsequently if the trailer is swinging to the right, brakes will be applied to the left side for the same reason as explained above. The curve C designates the theoretical path that the RCS would impose to the trailer depending on the magnitude and the orientation of erratic jackknifing forces. The curve D designates the actual path taken by the trailer as a result of erratic jackknifing being suppressed by the ride control system. It can be seen that the curves B and C are similar in shape but not

equal. This can be explained by the fact that on the one hand the trailer momentum is in part the result of the initial erratic jackknifing momentum, and on the other hand the actual trailer path is imposed by the ride control system to be closer to the truck path than it would be without the control system.

Having described the invention in detail, it will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that numerous modifications and changes may be made without departing from the spirit and basic concept of the invention. It is, therefore, not intended that the breadth of the invention be limited to the specific embodiment illustrated and described. Rather, it is intended that the scope of the present invention be determined by the appended claims.